

Sermon for Sunday, March 26, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"GRAVE WITH A REVOLVING DOOR"

St. John 20: 1-10

Text: "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." St. John 20: 8 and 9

Back in the Old Testament, Job raises an ancient question, "If a man die, shall he live again?" There are many famous graves in the world today. In Egypt one can see the pyramids, the final resting places of the great pharaohs. The Taj Mahal of India is perhaps the most beautiful and dazzling tomb in the world. In Medina, Mohammedans guard the tomb of Mohammed. In the Red Square of Moscow lies the tomb of Lenin whose body is preserved and displayed for all to see. Now, in China, not far from the Great Hall of Peking, the Chinese people have erected a mausoleum in which lies the body of Mao Tsetung. However, I have been to Jerusalem three times and there is no body of Jesus to be found. Even the site of his burial is hotly disputed and the fact is, his empty grave was of such little interest to his followers that its exact location was not even remembered by the middle of the first century. After all, who would be interested in the grave of a man who was very much alive?

In one sense of the word, the door to the grave of Jesus was a revolving door. There were several reasons for this. In the first place, the door opened in order to let Jesus out. A dead saviour simply is not possible. The great Russian novelist, Dostoevsky, in his book entitled, The Idiot, has a scene in which the Prince and one of the characters in the novel are passing along a gallery where hangs Holbein's painting of the Crucifixion. The Prince observes to his surprise that his companion is looking up at the picture. "What", exclaims the Prince, "looking at that picture, don't you know that a man might lose his faith by looking at that picture?" "That is what is happening to me," replied his companion. You see, the cross with the figure of a dead Jesus on it could only lead to despair that evil and sin always triumphed in the end. A soldier who died back during the First World War gave eloquent expression to the despair that comes with a dead savior in a paper found among his possessions. He had written, "If death ends all, then evil must be good, wrong must be right, and beauty ugliness. God is a Judas who betrays his Son, and with a kiss damns all the world to hell--if Christ rose not again."

And isn't that true for you? Could you have faith and confidence in a man who ended up on a Roman execution cross? That is why you will never find a crucifix in a Protestant church. A crucifix is a cross with the figure of the dying Jesus still fixed upon it. But a cross, while still representing what Jesus did for us, is empty. It signifies that he who died for us is no longer there. No, he is risen and the door of the grave swings open to let Jesus out. As St. Peter once put it, "(God)...has begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus...from the dead." (I Peter 1:3) Or, as St. Paul once put it, "(he is)...declared to be the Son of God with power...by the resurrection from the dead." (Romans 1:4) You see, if death can defeat Jesus, how can he be the Son of God? "If Christ has not been raised," said St. Paul, "then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." (I Cor. 15:14)

Can you imagine making an electric chair or a hangman's noose into an object of love and affection, or into a glorious symbol? Yet, that is exactly what we have done. The cross was an instrument of bloody torture and death. The Romans crucified literally thousands of people both before and after they executed Jesus. If Jesus had not come out the door of the grave would any right-minded person have glorified anything so hideous and repulsive as a cross stained with the Hood of a dead Jesus? Yet, many of us are wearing crosses this morning. It has become a glorious and beloved symbol because the door of the grave swung open and our Saviour lives. Yes, if the grave did not open to let Jesus out, there would be nothing to have faith in.

As Henry Barstow puts it in one of his little poems, "If Easter be not true 'Twere foolishness the cross to bear; He died in vain who suffered there; What matter though we laugh or cry, Be good or evil, live or die, If Easter be not true." So the door opened to let Jesus out.

But notice in the second place that the door opened to let us in. Our text for this morning says that, "the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in and he saw and believed..." Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, tells us that he was an ambitious young businessman in Hollywood, California, before he became a Christian. Friends told him about Jesus, that he was alive from the dead and that he could know him personally. Intellectual integrity forced him to investigate the claims of Christ but he found two things that he could not accept at first. First, he could not believe that the events of the life of Jesus, including his death and resurrection, could have possibly been foretold centuries before they occurred by the prophets of the Old Testament. Yet, as he began to study the Bible, he discovered that this was exactly what had happened. His first doubt was laid to rest. The second thing he could not believe was that Jesus had been raised from the dead. He found that no other religion claimed that its founder has been raised from the dead and that Christianity was unique in that regard. Dr. Bright wrote, "Any argument for the validity of Christianity stands or falls on the proof of the resurrection of Jesus... It is for this reason that His resurrection has been ridiculed and contested through the centuries by all kinds of skeptics." Yet, as Dr. Bright looked at the evidence, he came to six conclusions. First, the resurrection was foretold by Jesus. Second, the resurrection is the only reasonable explanation for his empty tomb. Third, the resurrection is the only reasonable explanation for the appearances of Jesus to his disciples. Fourth, the resurrection is the only reasonable explanation for the beginning of the Christian Church. Fifth, the resurrection is the only reasonable explanation for the transformed lives of the disciples. And sixth, only the resurrection can explain the transformed lives of millions through the centuries who have received the living Christ into their lives.

Dr. Bright goes on to write, "Simon Greenleaf, an authority in jurisprudence at Harvard Law School, concluded, 'it was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact.' Dr. William Lyon Phelps, the former distinguished professor of English literature at Yale, wrote, 'It may be said that the historical evidence for the resurrection is stronger than for any other miracle anywhere narrated.' John Singleton Copley, recognized as one of the greatest legal minds in British history, comments, 'I know pretty well what evidence is; and I tell you, such evidence as that for the resurrection has never broken down yet...'" Recently Dr. J. N. D. Anderson, a director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies at the University of London made a speech at Harvard University in which he looked at the evidence of the resurrection from the critical standpoint of a lawyer. He concluded from his legal analysis of the historical evidence that any rational, reasonable person is forced to the conclusion that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

Yes, the Bible says that the disciple went into the tomb and when he saw, he believed. The door of the grave opens to let us in so that we can believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he lives.

But notice in the third place that the door of the grave opens a third time, this time to let us out also. Jesus said, "because I live, you shall live also." That is the promise of Easter. The cross of Jesus tells us that he died for our sins. The empty grave tells us that death is not the end. Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am, there you may be also." Recently several books have appeared on the market written by medical doctors. These books deal with so-called "near death" experiences of people. According to the authors, a number of people have become clinically dead and the books deal with what happened to these people who were

apparently dead. According to their own accounts, they had some "after life" experiences that indicated that the human spirit does not cease to exist after bodily death. But the point I want to make is that these books became best sellers and now a movie has come on the market dealing with the same subject. Why have these books found such a large market? For the simple reason that we want to know what happens to us when we die. It is difficult for us to accept the position that death is the end of everything, the termination of life in every way. But until Jesus rose from the dead, we had no assurance of eternal life.

Across the centuries philosophers of every age have puzzled over the mystery of death. Could it be that this short, perplexing life of ours is our total destiny? And many of those philosophers have come up with arguments for life after death. They tell us our lives are incomplete and unfinished; there must be a continuation; there must be a reward or punishment in the next world by which the injustices and unfairness of life can be adjusted, its wrongs righted, its losses compensated, its sins atoned. But those arguments mean nothing in the face of the empty grave of Jesus who says to us, "Because I live, you shall live also." It was in that faith that early Christians went into the Roman arenas to face lions or to be crucified. It was and is in that faith that missionaries have crossed deserts, penetrated jungles, and gone to the ends of the earth to tell others about Jesus.

Dr. Jane Wheller was a member of the Wheaton College faculty some years ago. It was discovered that she had an incurable cancer and I would like to read you part of the letter she wrote to her students and her fellow faculty members when she learned of her imminent death. It goes like this: "please do not give a moment's grief to me. Think of me only happily, gaily, as I do of you...I do not say a cold goodbye, but rather a warm "till we meet again." By God's power and grace..in the land of the Blessed, perhaps I will be allowed to draw aside a curtain and greet you when you enter. With a heart full of love for everyone of you."

Could you write a letter like that this morning? Are you so sure this morning of the resurrection from the dead? You see, there is one more door that needs to be opened in the lives of us all. It is the door of our hearts. Jesus says, "behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door, I will come into him and sup with him and he with me." You see, the Bible tells us that Jesus came so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life(St. John 3:15). Yes, the door to the grave opened to let Jesus out, it opened to let us in that we might believe, it opens to let us out into eternal life. But, in the end, everything depends on the door to your heart. Is it open to let Jesus in?